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From labour migration to labour mobility? The spectre of the multinational worker in Europe

Rutvica Andrijasevic, Department of Management, University of Bristol, UK
Devi Sacchetto, Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology, University of Padua, Italy

Abstract

There is currently a large knowledge gap about intra-European labour migration. Existing scholarship focuses overwhelmingly on the movement of workers from East to West Europe. Commentators are caught up in a debate over whether such movement is best understood in terms of social dumping and hence a race to the bottom, or in terms of business opportunities and benefits for firms, states and migrants. The argument put forward in this article is that both approaches are inadequate in that they focus attention on a linear East-to-West movement and discuss this movement from the vantage point of the state, businesses and trade unions in the country of destination. It is our suggestion that such readings of intra-European labour migration fail to grasp the changes in labour force behaviour engendered by freedom of movement and European Union citizenship. In order to gain a clearer understanding of emerging migration patterns in the enlarged Europe, this article adopts mobility as the analytical lens through which to examine the integration of labour markets as well as the tensions between capital, trade unions and labour to which mobility gives rise. Building on fieldwork and interviews with migrant workers conducted at Foxconn electronics assembly plants in the Czech Republic, the article illustrates processes of both segregation and mobilisation produced by intra-European labour mobility, and suggests that the term ‘multinational’ worker is best suited to convey the experiences and practices of this emergent workforce.

Keywords

Labour migration, intra-EU mobility, social dumping, Czech Republic, Foxconn

Introduction

The European Union (EU) enlargement that transformed the EU-15 into the EU-28 generated considerable debate on the impact of labour migration from East Europe on economies, employment and industrial relations in West Europe. Broadly speaking, there are two strands to the discussion: the ‘social dumping’ perspective, which sees labour migration as unsettling of existing industrial compromises in West Europe; and the ‘integrationist’ perspective, which sees migration as beneficial to economic growth prospects. Commentators in the first strand identify the causes of social dumping in West-East industrial relocation and East-West posting of workers (Caro et al., 2015). The difference in social standards and wages results in a ‘race to the bottom’, a downward pressure on social and living standards in the EU-15. Commentators in the second strand suggest that, despite popular anxieties about job displacement, the free mobility of East European workers is beneficial to the EU-28 (Bonin et al., 2008; Kahanec et al., 2010). The EU-15 needs a new workforce to offset its ageing population and fill unpopular jobs in a secondary market characterised by temporary contracts and low wages.

While the social dumping and integrationist strands offer important insights into EU labour market integration, they are only partially able to grasp intra-EU labour mobility and its effects on the structure of the labour market. Labour and industrial relations studies have difficulty accounting for the changes currently being engendered by intra-EU labour migration for two main reasons, both conceptual and methodological. First, scholars rely on classical models of migration flows that view migration in terms of a linear movement from one location (the sending country) to another (the receiving country), or as circular (from the sending to the receiving country and back again). The problem with this approach is that migration is perceived in terms of a single or repeated linear movement between two countries. Second, scholars consider labour migration from the perspective of the state, businesses and/or trade unions, rather than from the perspective of migrants. These approaches have two consequences: they marginalise the viewpoints and strategies of mobility enacted by migrants themselves, and they posit the interests of employers and organised labour in West Europe as primary. In doing so, social dumping and integrationist approaches considerably narrow the field of analysis within which labour mobility is framed, and are unable to grasp changes in the behaviour of the labour force in the enlarged EU.

In order to capture emerging migration patterns as well as the forms of control and tension to which they give rise, both in the workplace and within organised labour, there is a need for what Meardi calls ‘cross-contamination’ (2007: 40) between labour studies and sociological migration studies. Understanding the EU-wide mobility of workers requires both labour and social explanations. In contrast to labour studies’ focus on migrants’ labour market incorporation, sociological migration studies attend to the subjective side of migration and hence to the strategies that propel labour migration. Labour migration, as we discovered in our case study of EU migrant workers at Foxconn electronics assembly plants in the Czech Republic, is driven by the prospects offered by the EU-wide labour market, and by migrants’ subjective desires to create new and better social and financial opportunities for themselves. By bringing the subjective side of migration to bear on current understandings of European labour market integration, this article reveals an emerging pattern of geographical and occupational mobility among workers from East Europe that is far from linear or unidirectional. By foregrounding the mobility of labour, this article suggests that in order to understand intra-EU labour migration we must conduct research from the point of view of migration rather than of capital, the state and/or trade unions. The mobility of labour, we suggest, is the key analytical and political field in which to investigate both the tensions generated by migrant labour and the making of the figure of the ‘multinational worker’ (Serafini, 1974).

The limits of mainstream approaches to intra-EU labour migration

Scholars working within the social dumping tradition stress the large differences among the EU-28 in relation to labour, business regulation and social policy. From the social dumping perspective, there are three main consequences of the EU-wide free movement of capital and labour: the lowering of wages and employment standards in West Europe, the weakening of trade unions, and the strengthening of employers’ power. First, wages and employment standards decrease because East European workers are willing to work for lower salaries than domestic workers, causing job displacement and an increase in unemployment among the local workforce as

employers prefer to hire migrant and/or posted workers (Cremers et al., 2007; Lillie, 2012). Second, trade unions in Western Europe are often opposed to the free movement of labour because labour migration is seen as putting pressure on existing collective agreements, resulting in a proliferation of temporary and flexible jobs that are difficult to unionise (Krings, 2009; Wagner and Hassel, 2015). Furthermore, with increased scope for business relocation to East Europe, coercive comparison undermines European-level union actions and alliances (Bernaciak, 2010; Meardi, 2012). Third, the construction of an integrated European labour market strengthens employers' power by enabling firms to relocate production to areas that are close to Western markets but where a qualified labour force is less costly.

The integrationist literature is in tension with the social dumping scholarship. The integrationist approach supports the liberalisation of mobility and emphasises the advantageous business opportunities and benefits migration brings to states. The free movement of labour and capital is posited as a win-win situation for sending and receiving states alike (Borjas, 1999) as well as for migrant workers in that it valorises human capital and improves states' prospects of economic growth. The benefits for the sending states consist in the reduction of unemployment among unskilled workers and an increase in wages and remittances channelled into the development of new and existing businesses. Receiving states benefit from the reduction of labour market tensions, since migrant workers fill the gaps in low-status job sectors (Kahanec and Zimmermann, 2009). Finally, the benefits for migrants are legal migratory and employment channels, higher wages compared with their countries of origin, and the development of new skills (Holzmann and Munz, 2004).

To examine intra-EU labour migration from the viewpoint of the state, businesses and/or trade unions is to marginalise migrants' perspectives and to ignore migrant workers as market actors. Labour market integration and national and transnational relations of production are not driven exclusively by the mobility of capital, but also by the mobility of labour (Stan and Erne, 2014). Although the mobility of labour is gaining prominence among employment relation scholars who stress the significance of the 'double mobility' of capital and labour, mobile labour is still viewed as an effect of mobile capital (see Altreiter et al., 2015). By contrast, this article considers mobile labour as constitutive in shaping intra-EU labour migration and EU market integration. Starting its analysis from the point of view of labour mobility, the article draws on an 'autonomy of migration' perspective that posits migration as a collective form of exit from environments where either capital or the state control labour movement (Mezzadra, 2011; Moulier Boutang, 2002). As will become apparent, migrant workers use the European space to their advantage by comparing working conditions, wages and the costs of reproduction, and consequently opting for work opportunities in the European market that suit them best. Contrary to the social dumping scenario, migrant workers utilise mobility and temporariness to exit unfavourable working and living conditions, despite constraining labour regimes imposed by employers on the low-paid temporary workforce.

This shift in analysis, from seeing the mobility of labour as an effect of actions by capital and/or the state to seeing mobile labour as a market actor, also requires a shift in methodology, from quantitative data and statistical methods to qualitative methods. While studies working within the quantitative tradition provide important insights into expected trends in labour migration, datasets, surveys and economic models are

unable to answer questions about the ways in which social determinants and subjective models shape intra-European mobility. To counter this weakness, this article adopts ethnographic methods, with a strong emphasis on participant observation such as living in workers' dormitories and sharing their facilities, that are best suited to examining the subjective factors that inform labour behaviour.

The experiences of migrant workers presented in this article are drawn from ethnographic fieldwork at Foxconn conducted in the Czech Republic in 2012 in order to compare Foxconn's labour regimes in mainland China and Europe. Foxconn is the third-largest private employer in the world (after Walmart and McDonald's), and the world's largest electronics contract manufacturer. Its manufacturing centre is in mainland China, where it employs around 1 million people in 32 factories. Over the last 15 years Foxconn has developed a territorial diversification strategy and entered the European market through its subsidiaries in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Turkey and Russia. The Czech Republic is Foxconn's most important European site, but there is remarkably little scholarly research on the firm's work regimes outside China. During the fieldwork we gathered 63 interviews with Foxconn workers and key informants. While the bulk of the interviews were with workers, we also interviewed managers and key informants in public institutions such as labour ministries, trade unions, labour inspectorates, labour offices, local job centres, vocational schools and NGOs.

The EU: an open but stratified labour market

The free movement of workers is changing national labour markets across the EU, as the workforce in various countries is increasingly composed of domestic as well as migrant workers. The European Commission's (2014) data shows that in the EU-28 there are 26 million migrants (working age 15–64), 10.3 million of whom are EU citizens. Even countries with very low wages, such as Bulgaria and Romania, are experiencing immigration flows, while southern European countries have become countries of emigration to West and North Europe (Verwiebe et al., 2013). The case of Foxconn in the Czech Republic illustrates the relationship between immigration flows and workforce composition.

In the two plants, at the peak of production, Foxconn employed roughly 9000–10,000 workers. Czechs and a small number of Slovaks, Vietnamese, Ukrainians and Mongolians were hired directly by Foxconn and made up around half the workforce. The remaining employees were Slovaks, Poles, Romanians and Bulgarians employed by temporary work agencies (TWAs). The nationalities of Foxconn workers reflected the general situation in the Czech Republic, where in 2011 non-nationals accounted for 5.4% of the workforce, mostly from Slovakia (114,000), Ukraine (70,000), Vietnam (34,000), Poland (21,000), Bulgaria (8,000) and Romania (7,000) (Horáková, 2011). Migrant workers at Foxconn often had previous experience of labour migration. Poles, Slovaks and Romanians had frequently worked in another European country before arriving in the Czech Republic. Similarly, it was not uncommon for workers from outside the EU (e.g. Vietnam) to have gained previous international work experience in other Asian or Persian Gulf countries.

Scholars disagree over whether it is the state (Guild and Mantu, 2011), the European Commission (Castles, 2006), the market (Ciupijus, 2011) or employers that act as

‘gatekeepers’ (Rodriguez, 2004) of intra-European labour migration. It is impossible, we suggest, to understand intra-EU migration without considering the ways in which migrants themselves, through their experiences and practices, are shaping and directing flows of labour migration in Europe. Freedom of movement, such as that of EU migrant workers at Foxconn, is producing a workforce that is more aware of the European dimension of the labour market, of strategies for moving from one country to another, and of how to obtain work in different EU states:

I am 43 and I come from the countryside in Bulgaria. After I completed vocational school I worked as driver on tractors, trucks and buses. I also worked in Croatia and Serbia. Before I came here, I had various opportunities and could choose between work in Spain, Italy and the Czech Republic, and I chose the latter. In Spain and Italy the work was in agriculture but we knew that the working conditions were bad. So my partner and I decided to come to the Czech Republic. (Vassil, Bulgarian, Pardubice)

As we can see, work experience in different contexts allows migrants to accumulate knowledge about labour migration, develop cross-country job search strategies, and compare wages and working conditions experienced in various locations. As with the migrant workers at Foxconn, freedom of movement enables workers to define their own mobility, and it broadens the scope of their labour migration beyond the axis of country-of-origin versus country-of-destination. Migrants make use of both institutionalised pathways (TWAs) and informal social networks (family and friends) to access the EU-wide labour market. Their decision to stay in or leave a job depends on the availability of different employment opportunities across Europe and the restrictions imposed on their movement (i.e. work permits):

I am 29 and I worked for six years at a sewing machine in the clothing industry in Ploiesti [Romania] for an Italian company. I was fine but I wanted more from life. In 2006 I went to Spain because I had friends there and I thought that life was better in Spain. In Madrid I worked as a cleaner and then I worked in Burgos in a bakery. My partner worked in construction and then as an assistant cook. With the economic crisis we lost our jobs. Our Romanian friends who had been in Pardubice for a while told us about job openings at Foxconn and so we came here. If we run out of work we’ll go to Romania, and if all goes well we can stay, and if not we will leave again for another country that is open [i.e. does not require work permits]. (Florentina, Romanian, Pardubice)

Investigating the mobility of labour through an interpretative lens reveals the inadequacy of arguments that compare intra-European labour migration to guest workers schemes during the 1950s–1970s (Castles, 2006) or migratory flows between Mexico and the US (Favell, 2008). The main difference is that, unlike Mexicans in the US or guest workers in Germany in the 1950s–1970s, current labour migrants are EU citizens whose rights and obligations are guaranteed under EU law and who must be treated in the same way as nationals with regard to access to work, conditions of work and employment, and social and tax benefits. Moreover, current intra-European labour migration is more complex and more fragmented in that it pivots on a regime of differential mobility (Rigo, 2005). Transitional restrictions allowed countries to limit the movement of workers from new member states for two, five or seven years from the date of accession. This entailed that member states could pursue different options,

resulting in a situation where, for example, the UK allowed A8 citizens to access its labour market in 2004 while Germany did so only in 2011. As mechanisms of labour market control, transitional restrictions differentiate the labour market even further in that they apply only to employees but not to services. Independent contractors and companies that provide temporary services, including the posting of workers, could avail themselves of the right to freedom of movement starting from the first day of accession, while individual employees could not.

Hence intra-EU labour migration is taking place in an ‘open’ but highly stratified labour market. This entails that labour mobility, as well as being driven by migrants’ own comparisons of working conditions, wages and costs of reproduction in various countries, is also shaped by specific social processes and regulatory mechanisms. We suggest that the understanding of current intra-European migratory flows requires a move away from models developed for other migration movements, towards identifying the complexity of the social processes that shape labour mobility in the enlarged Europe. By placing ‘migrant capital’ (Ryan et al., 2015) – such as migrants’ knowledge, experiences and social networks with regard to labour migration – at the centre of research, we can begin to discern Europe-wide trajectories of labour mobility and to map migration flows that are neither linear nor limited to two countries, but instead are multidirectional while at the same time correlated with the politics of labour market regulation.

A temporary workplace

Migrant EU workers view their jobs at Foxconn as temporary. We show in this section that workers see their posts as short-term because of the stratification of the market as well as their own migratory strategies.

The stratification of the market is clearly discernible at Foxconn plants. The workforce is composed of directly and indirectly employed workers. The former constitute about 60% of the workforce and are predominantly Czech, plus a small group of Ukrainian, Vietnamese and Mongolian workers directly employed by Foxconn on permanent contracts. The indirectly employed group is made up of EU workers from the neighbouring countries of Slovakia, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria, who are hired on short-term contracts through TWAs. They make up circa 40% of the total workforce, although this figure rises to 60% (Bormann and Plank, 2010). Foxconn started using agency workers in late 2004, when the Czech government introduced agency employment into the Labour Code, as required by the EU accession process, and set out the rules for temporary work (Hála, 2007). Foxconn deploys agency workers to drive down labour costs and achieve flexible labour use over a prolonged period so as to meet the demands of seasonal just-in-time production and the cost-cutting pressure that corporate customers place on the firm.

The hourly wage for direct workers in the Czech Republic is around €3.50, amounting to €600–€700 per month. Agency workers earn less. Their wage is €2.50 per hour or about €400–€500 per month, depending on the number of hours worked. Compared to the net average wage in the Czech Republic in 2012 of €700–€750 and the minimum wage of €330 per month (Czech Statistical Office, 2015), Foxconn workers earn less than the national average but significantly above the minimum wage. Shifts and working hours are different for direct and agency workers, and the latter are likely to

work longer and more irregular shifts than direct workers. Direct workers in production are hired on permanent contracts, work 12-hour shifts, both day and night, three times a week, and need to be available for any other potential shifts during the same week. They are given their shifts three months in advance. Agency workers are hired on three-month rollover contracts, work 12-hour night and day shifts, work for five or more days a week during peak periods, and are given their shifts with at best a week's notice, at worst the same day. During periods of low production, agencies return workers to their countries of origin with a promise to recall them when new orders come in (Andrijasevic and Sacchetto, 2014). In addition, workers on the assembly line, in particular those hired through agencies, have little opportunity to progress to higher positions or more senior roles. Even though workers might have extensive previous experience in assembly work, this experience does not lead to career progression, either at Foxconn or for another employer:

I am a mechanic by profession. I was in Hungary at the Blackberry mobile phone factory in Zalaegerszeg. That was very easy and I used to be able to cover any position there. When I went to Slovakia for the first time, I worked in a tattoo parlour in the town of Galanta. Then I started working for Samsung, because I heard there were other Romanians working there. For six years I worked for Samsung, all I did was pack TV sets. It is hard to put TVs in boxes eight hours a day, but at Samsung they would pay double if my shift was on Saturday or Sunday, and they would pay double overtime as well. There is more stress there, but better pay. (Alexandru, Romanian, Pardubice)

Casualisation – the acceptance of long and sporadic working hours and low pay – has led scholars to portray migrant workers as victims of ferocious new capitalism, as unfree labour (Geddes et al., 2013), and/or as driving a race to the bottom (cf. Krings, 2009). While not disputing the exploitative working conditions that migrant workers experience, we suggest that these views of migrant labour stem from the notion of a single, permanent workplace. What such views fail to consider is that for migrant workers, working at Foxconn is just one among several jobs they might take, and that it offers opportunities to expand their social networks. Agency workers typically lodge in dormitories, located off factory site and across town, that house between 200 and 1000 workers. While staying in dormitories produces social-spatial segregation in relation to the local context and workers (Caro et al., 2015), it also guarantees migrant workers a certain degree of sociability among their compatriots and a continuous exchange of information with respect to work at Foxconn, other job opportunities and social events.

Migrants' knowledge and experience of working conditions can therefore hardly be reduced to a single workplace or a single country. If we consider the working conditions of migrant workers at Foxconn in relation to their previous work experiences and jobs elsewhere in Europe, we can see that far from being unfree labour, EU migrant workers are unlikely to be confined to one workplace or to permanently working long and irregular hours for low pay:

In Poland I worked in a bakery but I was fired. I'm 50 and too old for the job anyway because in Poland they want 20–30-year-old bakers. I arrived in the Czech Republic some six years ago through an agency to work for Panasonic. At Panasonic I worked four years, and when [the contract] finished I came to

work for Foxconn. I was hired through an agency and have been at Foxconn for two years. Now I would like to leave the Czech Republic and find a different job. I'm looking for a new job, a new life elsewhere. (Kasper, Polish, Pardubice)

Moreover, like hospitality sector workers in London (Alberti, 2014), EU migrant workers at Foxconn display weak attachments to the job and the firm. Despite the lack of career prospects, migrants' mobility is propelled by their desire to build a decent life by looking at job opportunities across Europe. European migrant workers appear then as a low-income mobile workforce quite adaptable to flexible working regimes across different jobs and different countries.

Experiences of labour migration, cross-country job comparisons, temporary attitudes to their workplace and weak attachments to the firm all enable migrant workers to exit unfavourable working situations. In the case of Foxconn, this is most visible in the high turnover of migrant agency workers: 30–40% per year, compared with 15–20% of direct workers. Smith (2006) identifies a high labour turnover as an expression of the 'mobility power of labour', and points out that labour scholars regard turnover negatively and as inferior to voice, since it arises from individual acts rather than collective mobilisation. Discussions of individual exit are relevant, we argue, because they indicate that mobility generates tension between capital and labour. A high number of indirect workers means that the firm is theoretically in a stronger bargaining position than when it is dealing with directly employed labour. We can thus interpret the segmentation of the workforce by directly versus indirectly employed status as an example of Foxconn's application of the structural conditions under which workers' bargaining power is reduced. However, our material suggests that indirectly recruited workers accumulate more labour mobility capacity, which puts them in a stronger bargaining position against an employer that is reluctant to establish voice mechanisms. What Alberti calls 'transnational exit power' (2014) represents a threat to employers and governments, which in the case of the Czech Republic have proved willing to increase wages by 60.4% since 2004 (Meardi, 2007: 47).

The migrant workforce and trade unions

The relationship between trade unions and temporary migrant workers is difficult. National and international trade unions alike struggle to devise policies that meet the needs of migrant workers. Transnational mobility strategies and a temporary attitude to work seem among the key reasons for migrant workers' weak interest and participation in trade unions (Holgate, 2013). Our research at Foxconn's plants confirms migrants' lack of interest in organised labour. The trade union at Foxconn, part of the Metalworkers Federation (KOVO), had circa 350 members across the two plants, and at the time of our fieldwork no members were temporary European migrant workers. Herbert, the trade union representative at the plant, identified the language barrier, short-term contracts and high turnover as the main obstacles to the unionisation of temporary migrant workers. These are certainly some of the reasons for migrant workers' lack of interest in trade union activities. Other reasons, as we will show, lie in social processes that have led to a narrow union strategy.

Lack of interest in the trade union is not to be taken as ‘inherent to migrant workers’ (Meardi, 2007: 53). The fact that migrant workers did not join the union at Foxconn did not entail that they were unaware or had no expectations of the union:

At Foxconn the trade union is asleep. Currently [the agency] is dismissing people but no one is doing anything. I am in such a low position that I cannot do anything, but I think the trade union should do something to help people who are dismissed. I am a member of a trade union, but in Slovakia in the retail sector. This is unfair as we are part of the EU now and our rights should be protected. (Ladislav, Slovak, Pardubice)

The trade union’s main concern was for direct workers: to achieve a wage increase to compensate for inflation, to increase the number of annual leave days, and to abolish 12-hour shifts. The union’s biggest achievement to date had been to limit the maximum working time to 163 hours per month for direct workers. The lack of interest in migrant workers’ working conditions originated from the union’s view that agency workers should be employed only on a temporary basis as substitute for Czech workers:

Agency workers’ purpose is to cover fluctuations in orders. The number of agency workers at the plant should be equal to or less than 20% of the core workforce. But here we’ve got more likely 50% agency workers. (Viktor, Czech trade unionist, Pardubice)

A high percentage of temporary migrant workers is thus perceived as a threat to union members in that the former reduce the employment prospects of domestic workers. At the same time, the KOVO leadership is also aware that Czech workers benefit from the presence of migrant agency workers, since the latter absorb the impact of the fluctuating demand for labour:

If a firm loses an order then the agency workers will be let go first. Although we could tell core workers that we’ll protect their jobs, in reality we are facing a situation where core workers might get punished next. Our representative could also represent agency workers, but the danger then is that we could have a situation where 90% of the workforce are agency workers, especially in areas where the job is relatively simple to do. (KOVO representative, Prague)

This conscious union strategy to exclude migrant agency workers has led critics to argue that Czech trade unions are indifferent to the rights of foreign workers, and that their commitment to the principle of equal treatment for domestic and migrant workers in terms of remuneration and working conditions is purely rhetorical (Čaněk, 2014). The unions’ strategy in relation to the migrant workforce, Čaněk suggests, originates in the idea that the Czech Republic is a buffer zone between East and West Europe, and that migration is a short-term occurrence subject to economic cycles (2014: 104). This would imply that labour migration is a new occurrence in the Czech Republic; however, in fact that is not the case, and the roots of some of the current migration flows lie in the country’s past. In Czechoslovakia labour migration was well established and took place through labour exchange agreements between socialist countries in the 1960s–1980s. These agreements were informed by the internationalist spirit that considered cooperation between socialist countries a form of obligation

(Schwenkel, 2015) and enabled the nationals of those countries, such as Vietnam, to move to Czechoslovakia for work and study.

Hence while some commentators suggest that trade unions' isolation and limited reach arise from the fact that Czech unions are firm-based rather than industry-based and conduct fragmented collective bargaining (Visser, 2011), we argue that union strategy is also affected by specific cultural and social perceptions. In Czechoslovakia during the 1980s, the notion of a socialist civilising mission in relation to overseas immigrant workers led to exclusion of and discrimination against foreign workers. One example is the deportation of Vietnamese female workers who became pregnant, pregnancy being considered an infringement of the ideology of 'honest socialist work' (Alamgir, 2013: 146). In the post-1989 period, skilled and more highly educated workers at the heads of the unions embraced pro-market state policies and believed that private firms were best without much union involvement (Ost, 2009). The fact that the interests of the union leadership were based on the model of cooperation with management resulted in unions' having little or no interest in unskilled workers (Kaminska and Kahancová, 2011).

The mobility of labour certainly represents a challenge for trade unions due to language barriers, the social isolation of migrant workers and the segmentation of the workforce (Altreiter et al., 2015; Wagner and Hassel, 2015). Importantly, however, the mobility of labour also exposes Czech unions' deeply engrained preconceptions about migrant and unskilled workers, who in the current context are epitomised by migrant agency workers. Hence the reasons for low unionisation among migrant workers and the weakening of collective bargaining are not to be sought simply in relation to migrants, but also in relation to the narrow union strategies produced both by unions' protectionist agendas and by their cultural and social prejudices. Given the large proportions of migrant agency workers in sectors such as electronics, the future role of the trade unions is uncertain at best.

Conclusions

This article has investigated intra-EU labour migration from the perspective of the mobility of labour. Building on a case study of Foxconn plants in the Czech Republic, the article has illustrated the relevance of subjective factors in labour migration. Driven by the desire to improve their lives and create better opportunities for themselves and their families, migrant workers from East Europe undertake a range of temporary jobs in various European countries. Their mobility strategies are not confined to a single workplace or a single country, but are enacted across the European labour market and shaped by their knowledge about cross-country job search strategies, by work and pay levels in different locations, and by migrants' networks. Although it is impossible to generalise given the qualitative nature of the study, the material presented in this article points to the formation of a new low-wage European workforce. The mobility practices of this workforce challenge employers' expectations that workers will be permanently available to work long and irregular hours for low pay, and also challenge unions' strategy of relegating migrant agency workers to the position of an inferior and disposable workforce.

In placing labour mobility at the centre of analysis, this article does not suggest that migrant workers do not experience work insecurity, underemployment or exploitation.

On the contrary, the article has pointed to the new forms of labour market segmentation and labour utilisation that have emerged as a consequence of labour market integration and deregulated agency work. However, examining intra-European labour migration from the point of view of migration does suggest that contemporary labour migration in the EU cannot be reduced to an effect of capital and/or state manipulation. Practices of mobile labour are difficult to grasp by relying on linear labour market pathways or traditional forms of attachment to the firm (Alberti, 2014). Taking migration as a starting point for the analysis of intra-EU labour migration is not simply a matter of acknowledging the agency (i.e. exit) of migrant workers as they struggle to improve their working and living conditions and opportunities. What is at stake is a theoretical and political challenge to elaborate adequate categories to grasp the specificity of this group of migrants and to recognise the way in which the mobility of labour, as well as that of capital, is a constituent force in the production of EU labour markets.

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